Vocabulary Instruction: Crisis in Classroom Delivery at Primary Schools in Sokoto State

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Abstract: *This paper discussed the crises in the teaching and learning of the English language in primary schools in Sokoto State. The paper introduced those vocabularies are the bolts and knots of any language. They are the building blocks of the meaning derived from the four language skills. It conceptualized vocabulary and stated how relevant they are in the teaching and learning of the English language and other content subject areas. This is in form of associating the vocabulary with the referent it signifies. It also highlighted the crises arising in the teaching and learning of vocabulary in primary schools. Themes range from those induced by the English language teachers, the language learners, the methodology of instruction, and the English language curriculum. Of these factors, the language teachers' factor is the most striking because the teacher can help overcome the others through proper instructional activities. The paper highlighted the educational implication of these crises as it affects primary school students' performance in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the target language, overall communicative competence, and learning of other subjects. It suggested that English language teachers shall engage in different and relevant activities that foster vocabulary learning, knowledge, and usage to achieve communicative competence in English. It concluded that vocabulary knowledge is prerequisite knowledge for learning to communicate and study other subjects. Therefore, it must be developed.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary, Crisis, Language teaching, Language learning*

Introduction

Vocabularies are the bolts and knots of any language. The four language skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing depends on these to be acquired, learned, or communicated. They are the vehicle of the message which must be used for one to communicate effectively. In language teaching and learning, the ability to master them depends on the activities of the language teachers, language teaching materials, and students to learn, develop, and apply them the inappropriate situation. Therefore, they are very important in developing communicative competence. It is on this note that Graves (2016) noted that absence of words can have negative effect on the students. Having reviewed more than one hundred researches on vocabulary teaching, Graves (2016) summarized that many pupils that grew up in poverty get to school with

enervating small vocabulary that severely hamper their ability to learn and to succeed in school. Thus, vocabulary knowledge is paramount in language teaching and learning as Pikulski and Templeton (nd) concluded in writing about the importance of a rich vocabulary for children:

> "…perhaps the greatest tools we can give students for succeeding, not only in their education but more generally in life, is a large, rich vocabulary and the skills for using those words. Our ability to function in today's complex social and economic worlds is mightily affected by our language skills and word knowledge" (p.1)

Crisis

The word,*crisis,*was originated in Greek in the English language. The expression "krisis" is an offshoot of the verb "krino" which meant to separate, to choose, and to decide between two opposing choices, life, and death, success and failure (Koselleckin, Narotzky & Besnier, 2014). As a concept, crisis, is very difficult to define. This is due to its multidimensional usage. However, it This indicates making choice, judgment, or taking a decisive decision between two conflicting and opposing factors one of which is unfavourable. In his view, Narotzky and Besnier (2014) crisis transpires in disproportion between the difficulty and importance of a problem and the resources available to deal with it. This is a risky situation, a threat to normal mode, or an incentive to the better practice. From these conceptions, one can describe crisis as threat that exposes fragility, falling in standard, drives from the normality, breakdown in system, mismatches in practices, instability and uncertainty. Hence, we concluded that crisis in vocabulary instruction is the sudden emergence of instructional instability and uncertainty in the methodology that exposes fragility causing mismatches between goals and means of attaining that drive the overall system down. It is accidental adversity ravaging vocabulary instructional practices.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is words that a language speaker must understand and use to communicate effectively in a language. It is conceived as the words one must know to communicate effectively; words in speaking (expressive vocabulary) and words in listening (receptive vocabulary) (Maskor, & Baharudin, 2016). Hornby in Elsheikh and Heizman (2020) define vocabulary as the total number of words in a language; vocabulary is a list of words with their meanings. While Ur in Elsheikh and Heizman (2020) stated that vocabulary can be defined, roughly, as the words we teach in a foreign language. Furthermore, Maskor and Baharudin (2016) conceived vocabulary knowledge as the knowledge of the depth of vocabulary that brings up to the extent to which the word is understood by speakers. Expanding the conception, Qian stated that vocabulary knowledge also means students learn the words with deep meaning, pronunciation, spelling, frequency, sound structure, syntax and collocation according to context (Maskor & Baharudin, 2016). From these definitions, it can be deduced that understanding the meaning of words comes in different ways. It can be directly through carefully designed instruction or indirectly through everyday use of oral and written language.

In English language skills, four kinds of vocabulary can be identified (Pikulski & Templeton, nd). They are as follows:

i.   Expressive vocabularies,
ii.   Receptive vocabularies,
iii.   Oral Vocabularies, and
iv.   Literate vocabularies.

i.   Expressive vocabularies: these are vocabularies that can be used to express ourselves in leading the discourse. That is speaking and writing. These are vocabularies that relate to our greeting, discussions, turn-taking, exposition, narration, reporting, debating, etc.

i.   Receptive vocabularies: these are categories of vocabularies that we use when we engage in passive activities of listening and reading to comprehend the message. It is vocabulary that learners recognize when theysee or meet in the reading text but do not use in speaking and writing (Webb, 2009).

ii.   Oral vocabularies: these are vocabularies that are related to aura-oral activities. That is listening and speaking. Therefore, productive vocabulary can beaddressed as an active process, because the learners can produce the words to express theirthoughts to others (Webb, 2009).

iii.   Literate Vocabularies: these are vocabularies that deal with the integration of reading and writing. They are literate because they involve the ability to digest the graphical inputs and write what one comprehends before one becomes relevant to the discourse.

The importance of vocabulary in language teaching and learning cannot be over-emphasized. Zimmerman in Elsheikh and Heizman (2020) stated that vocabulary is central to language and of critical importance to typical language learning. It seems that vocabulary is an important part of the English teaching process. It is supposed to be a very effective communicative device as it carries the highest level of importance within peoples´ verbal interaction. Teaching words is a crucial aspect of learning a language and other subjects as they are consistently being considered paramount across various educational trends (Graves, 2016). It is almost impossible to learn a language without words; even communication between human beings is based on words.

Crises in Teaching English language Vocabularies in Upper Basic Classes in Sokoto State

English language vocabulary in primary schools in Sokoto state in particular, and Nigeria in general, is instructed with multitudes of problems. These problems created confusion which translated into the crises not only in classroom delivery but in the overall language learning and general academic performance. This is because there is a strong connection between vocabulary size, vocabulary knowledge and communicative competence, and understanding of the content of any subject of study. To prove this, Nicholson and Dymock (2017) stated that when students lack vocabulary, they lack the thing it signifies. Bello (2013) stated that learners face problems communicating when they do not know a specific word for a particular context. This indicates that vocabularies are the foundation of inward thinking and external expression. However, the size and the knowledge of the students' vocabulary inform one on who the students are and who they can be.

Several studies found that primary school students are defective in terms of language learning and learning of other subjects (Galti, 2018; Nkechi, 2014;). They are found to be poor in listening, lack speaking fluency, read without understanding and write unintelligibly. These

problems can be a result of the smaller size and knowledge of the vocabulary. This statement is supported by Galti (2018) that English language teachers in Nigeria employ word list method in their vocabulary instruction in primary school. This is a methodology that words are written on a paper and presented to learners for the teacher to explain their meaning. Furthermore, Nkechi (2014) found that junior secondary school students in Gwagwalada Area Council have problems in recognizing letter sequences accurately and quickly, connecting sound speech to letters, and identifying the alphabets. The result further reveals that students lack phonemic awareness, had poor spelling knowledge, and find it difficult to match letters appropriately and also to break words into syllables. All these and many others indicated that there are crises in vocabulary instructions in schools. The crisis in vocabulary instruction in primary schools in Sokoto state can be understood under some factors. These factors are:

i.   English Language teacher factor
ii.   Methodological factor
iii. Students' factor
iv.   Curriculum factor

i.   **English Language teacher factor:** English language teachers in primary schools in Sokoto state have poor vocabulary instructional activities in primary schools. Many primary school teachers are not confident about the best practice in vocabulary teaching and at times do not know where to begin to form an instructional emphasis on vocabulary. They do not engage primary school students in meaningful vocabulary instruction with meaningful activities and instructional resources. Few classes can be identified with vocabulary posters on the wall, class reading corner, cupboard for the class library, students' vocabulary jotters and even reading journals. For elementary school teachers, vocabulary instruction involves teaching students the low frequency, complex, strange and unfamiliar words.

ii.   **Methodological factor:** Rote learning is widely used as a vocabulary instruction method in primary school in Sokoto State. Through this method, students memorize the meaning of words in isolation. This method disconnects the words with the context of use in the sentence, paragraphs, or the whole text. It also affects the meaning of the word about its roots and possible affixations, class, family, synonyms, antonyms, etc. the implication of this practice is a deficiency in learning English language skills, low vocabulary retention, and the creation of a gap between the communication and the student's performance in other subjects of studies. To close this vocabulary deficiency gaps, this paper strongly believes that utilization of the children's books can be a great help to English language teachers to teach English language vocabulary in the context of the students' age, language learning level, comprehension, and connect the students with the social, economic, political, religious, and cultural environment. The students will be fully immersed in the English language learning as the vocabularies are being domesticated to something they have previous knowledge in their First Language (L1).

iii. **Students' factor:** the students contribute to the crises in vocabulary instruction through their attitudes towards the lesson. There are times when the students internally interpret some words from their mother tongue into English and there is one on one correspondence between students' First Language (L1) and English

language. A study by Saidu, Bello, Hassan and Yahaya (2018) reported that many Hausa speakers of English learn the language not as a means of communication but as a subject of study which must be read and passed like any other subject. These attitudes affect students learning of English language skills for communication purposes and vocabulary as building blocks of the communication system. This crisis in students' attitudes has to be arrested otherwise English language would continue to be regarded only as a subject of study like History, Economics, Biology etc.

iv. **Curriculum factor:** the national curriculum in the country has recommended the vocabulary to be taught at each level of education. The curriculum cut these vocabularies across the content areas. Yet, it is often "surface learning" meaning that a term is taught, used a few times in a sentence, and then another term is taught (James, 2017). With this, students can identify the words they are looking for, but are unable to use them in the proper context. In addition, students are unable to recall words after long periods without review and use. That is the reason, students struggle hard with vocabulary retention and recalling in the content areas like science.

The paper argues that adequate knowledge of vocabulary plays a significant role in the development of content areas not of the English language but also in other subjects in post-primary schools. And if students understand what is being instructed and asked of them, they have a higher rate of success in responding to the contents and the demands of the questions.

Ideal Vocabulary Instruction in Primary Schools

Ideally, vocabulary teaching and learning have to be conducted in context. The meaning of English language words is solely dependent on the environment for meaning. The literal meaning memorized from the dictionary is the original, denotative, and conceptual meanings. They do not determine the context variation in which the words are being used in communication. Therefore, explicit teaching and learning of vocabulary have to be contextualized such that children's books serve as the most suitable instructional resource for better students' performance.

Richards in James (2017) pointed out several aspects of vocabulary knowledge. These aspects include thelimitations imposed on the use of the word, the syntactic features of the word such as word form, the phonemic derivations of the word, and the lexical as well as semantic association between the words used in context. In providing a framework for understanding vocabulary knowledge, Chapelle in James (2017) posited that knowledge of vocabulary framework should contain four dimensions which English language teachers should consider while teaching English language vocabulary. They are (a) vocabulary size, (b) knowledge of word characteristics, (c) lexicon organization, and (d) processes of lexical access.

Moinzadeh and Moslehpour (2012) pointed that the research on vocabulary knowledge made the distinction between the depth and the breadth of vocabulary as the two primary dimensions of vocabulary knowledge (p. 1016). The breadth of vocabulary knowledge or word size refers to the number of the words that learners know at a particular level of proficiency and depth of vocabulary which according to Qian in James (2017) encompasses pronunciation,

morphological knowledge, syntactic properties, meaning, register or discourse features, etc. each interacting with the other to ensure better comprehension of the text.

Educational implication of the paper

The teaching and learning of English language vocabulary have a great implication in learning L2 and the learning of other subjectsin the curriculum This implication is itemized as follows:

i. **To the language learner:**the inability of the language learner to master and identify the meaning, characteristics, roots, and prefixes of English language vocabulary affects the pupils' performance in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This affects not only the students' communicative competence but the overall performance. The vocabulary size and knowledge introduce students to the conceptual and contextual meaning of the words which serve as the foundation for other meanings associated with it in context, culture, society, and any other subject of study.

ii. **To the language teacher:** poor mastery of the pupils' English language vocabulary leads to crises in language teaching. The language teachers find it difficult to introduce students to concepts, understand parts of speech and their associative referents as well as understand and comprehend text passages or discourse. This is because they hardly associate the concept with the objects it signifies. Several studies indicated that with several content words, a language user can communicate and be understood especially through strategic competence.

iii. **To the overall language curriculum:** improper teaching and learning of English language vocabulary affect the overall curriculum objectives. The pupils find it hard to speak in good language, understand simple language, read and comprehend the target language as well as write intelligibly in the English language. In the learning of other subjects in the curriculum, the pupils find it difficult to understand the concepts under discussion, describe the referent, or appropriately used referent specific registers in the description, explanation, or discourse making. They also struggle in reading and comprehending the content of other subjects.

Suggestions

The paper made the following suggestions:

i. **Identify the Target Vocabulary:** The teacher shall consider the following in the identification of the target vocabulary to be taught to the students through the following:
   a. High frequency words: teach students the vocabulary that are commonly found across various pieces of literatureand/or relates to other subject matter.
   b. The teaching starts with vocabularies that are within the reach of the students, that is, those that students can easily be found, use to communicate, associated with, and those that they shall be able to explain these using words they already know.
   c. The vocabulary shall be those that pupils shall be able to use in their academic discussion, simple communication within the school and at their homes, and those that they and relate to other object found in their surroundings.

       d.   Vocabulary that iscontextually definedin the story given.

ii.   **Teach Word Analysis:** Once the teacher identified the vocabulary to be taught, the teacher shall teach the pupils how to study the words so that they can start forming the definition of the word. For example, the teacher can lead students' activities of identifying affixation of words. This can be through the identification of the roots, prefixes, and suffixes of the target words. The discussion of each part here is a ladder that connectspupils to arrest the meaning of stubborn words. Again, introducing affixation helps pupils to identify parts of speech of words and its relative derivation from one class target words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs to another class, for example, nominalization.

iii.   **Teach the Use of Context Clues:** The teacher shall teach the pupils about the context clues of the words. This is key to helping them start to use the context of the story to form a definition in their mind. The teacher begins asking questions to steer the students to the right direction. This can be done through the identification of the grammatical class of the target word:

       a. **Noun:** Who is using this thing? What are they using itfor? Where is this thing? What does it look like?

       b. **Verb:** Who is doing this action? Who are they doing ittoo? Where is the action taking place? What is the resultof this action?

       c. **Adjective:** What is being described? How else is the thingdescribed? Do you think it is a positive or negativedescription?

       d. **Adverb:** What action is being described? What else dowe know about this action? etc.

iv.   **Show How to Check Vocabulary Resources:** checking vocabulary resources can be done through word attack. This is a detective work that pupils done on from which they proceed to confirm whether their thoughts on the word are correct. So, the teacher shall teach them how to use a dictionary, whether it is an online or a physical dictionary. They need to how to look up a word, its phonemic transcription for pronunciation, the definition, and the origin. In case of polysemous words, the teacher can help pupils identify the correct usage as used in the pupils' reader.

v.   **Use Vocabulary in Activities and Games:** Even though language teachers are teaching words in a context-based, the pupils will benefit from using the words in a variety of games and activities. Here are some ideas to get the teacher started.

       a. Draw a picture of the words

       b. Act out the words

       c. Write some sentences using the words

       d. Make an index card of the target vocabularies and sort them into parts of speech, positive vs. negative, describers of a certain character etc.

       e. Create a word wall by writing the words on a cut-out that will remind children of the story and hanging them up.

       f. Create crossword puzzles. These can be done physically or with help of technology with the target vocabulary.

       g. Match words within the story that may be synonyms or antonyms. Or write synonyms and antonyms of the target vocabulary on index cards. Then, have your children match them to the target vocabulary.

    h. Play bingo. The English language teacher can also make bingo cards. The teacher usesa bingo card and reads off the definitions and has the pupil find the matching word.

    i. Quizlet: This is a system in which an English language teacher makes flashcards and usesthem to teach vocabulary. It can be utilized in a variety of simple games to practice vocabulary.

    j. The English language teacher can organize a contest to see which pupil can use the target words the most during discussions and/or in everyday conversations. At the end of the week, have a prize forthe pupil who used the most vocabulary words. That serves as a motivator to others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper reiterated that to bridge the gap in communication in the English language, being the medium of instruction and the subject of study, other subject teachers, and the students are to help provide students with context specific definition of words and its possible limitations. The English language teachers polish students' communication with some context specific register for proper communications in their areas of specialization. This can increase,improve, and retain rate of students'vocabulary in the content areas. The pupils mustbe taught explicit and applicable vocabulary instruction in the early primary years to catch young. Teaching applicable vocabulary instruction in the early years lay a solid foundation of academic vocabulary and life experiences.

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